

Grape Expectations

Vineyard owners hope farms lure more opportunities, tourists

By John Harrell

jharrell@courier-journal.com
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On a 25-acre farm southeast of Louisville near the Bullitt County line, Jerry Kushner grows grapes and produces wines that he believes would stand up to any vintage produced anywhere.

"The wine that can be produced in Kentucky can be the best in the United States," said Kushner, who operates Broad Run Vineyards with his wife, Marilyn. "I think as good as Europe."

Kushner is among a group of Kentucky vineyard owners eager to spread the grape gospel throughout Kentucky and beyond.

And the Kentucky Agriculture Development Fund heralds wineries as an avenue of diversification for tobacco farmers. But the push for that kind of expansion concerns veteran vintners like Kushner, who worries about the quality of wine produced and the direction of the state's wine industry.

"What they have to do is set up a few places in Kentucky where the expertise exists and we can show the people how good" Kentucky wine is, Kushner said.

A wine market feasibility study, prepared for the Kentucky Vineyard Society and the Ag Development Fund and released in July, envisions Kentucky as a niche market. It recommends that the state's wine industry develop a touristbased distribution model before aggressively marketing itself within the state.

The tourist model is successful in Southern Indiana, with Huber and Stumler orchards producing and selling wine on their you-pick produce farms in Starlight, Ind.



Rows of grapevines cover a field at Broad Run Vineyards, which is on a 25-acre farm southeast of Louisville near the Bullitt County line. The vineyard is owned by Jerry Kushner, who believes Kentucky's climate and land produce grapes that achieve the proper balance of acid and sugars.



Marilyn Kushner opened bottles of wine for tasting at Broad Run Vineyards.

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Ag Development Fund executive director John-Mark Hack is a firm believer in the model.

"A Kentucky wine industry is going to be based on a direct tourist model," Hack said. "The new wineries create opportunities for farms to diversify."

Vineyard Society President Dave Loney agrees that destination wineries represent Kentucky's best opportunity to develop the wine industry. But he respects Kushner's opinion.

"People will have different philosophies, and I'm looking forward to seeing the different philosophies as they help push things forwards," Loney said. "Not everybody has the same dream."

Smith-Berry Vineyard and Winery, outside New Castle, Ky., is an example of the destination dream and the fund's diversification efforts at work. Chuck Smith, who owns the farm with wife Mary, became interested in winemaking after spending time in the Napa Valley of Northern California several years ago.

Smith, whose diversification efforts also include raising free-range chicken and turkeys, invested about \$100,000 in the vineyard and received \$45,000 from the Ag Development Fund. He devoted 5 acres on his 100-acre farm to winemaking and planted his first grapes in 2000.

The farm's vineyard is expected to bear its first fruit next year. But Smith did not wait for the grapes, instead buying juice from a Missouri vineyard to produce his first series of wines. Since opening on Aug. 24, the farm has sold nearly 1,500 bottles of wine. At that rate, the farm will easily reach Smith's first-year goal of selling 5,000 bottles.

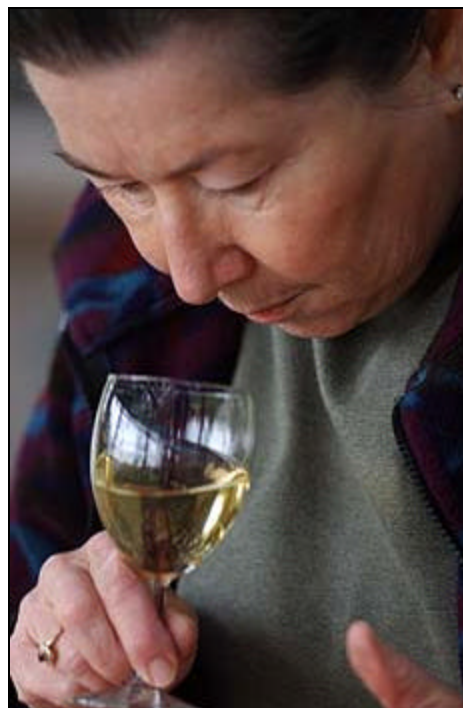
"We have three daughters and I think two of the three would like to come back after they get their college education and work on the farm," Smith said. "Doing the alternative agriculture, with the grapes, will allow them to do that."

But Kushner, a vintner for more than 30 years, criticized farmers who import juice to produce wine. He said Kentucky should emulate Pennsylvania, which has a law that puts a 25 percent cap on out-of-state grapes used in winemaking.

"You've got guys shipping in wine to their cellars, putting it in a bottle and slapping a label on it," he said. "That's a crock. They're getting away with it, and that's misleading."

While Kentucky's wine industry grapples with its direction, there is also disagreement over which grapes work best with the state's climate.

Kushner focuses on vinifera grapes, the kind used for chardonnays and cabernets. Others,



Marilyn Kushner tasted wine at the vineyard. Marilyn helps her husband, Jerry Kushner, run the business.

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such as Smith, focus on French and American hybrids, such as Riseling, Norton and Vidal grapes. Kushner believes that Kentucky's climate and land produce grapes that achieve the proper balance of acid and sugars.

"Our climate here is just phenomenal," he said.

Not everyone agrees. The wine market feasibility study reports that vinifera grapes suffer significant vine tissue damage when temperatures reach minus 8 or colder, a temperature that southeast Jefferson County hits between 3 and 3 1/2 years each decade. The bluegrass region, home to several other leading Kentucky vineyards, reaches that low between 2 1/2 and 3 years each decade.

Smith took a similar view when he decided what grapes to plant in 2000, taking trips to Missouri and Arkansas to study those state's wine industries

"The California-type grapes, the cabernets, the chardonnays, really can't stand the cold weather," he said. "Some people think they can, but the University of Kentucky doesn't think they can. The French hybrids and the American hybrids can, so that's what we're planting and growing."

Whether it's French hybrids, American hybrids or viniferas, Kentucky's wine industry is expected to experience significant growth over the next five years.

In 2001, eight wineries in the state produced grape wine; another 12 are licensed for production. Seven are classified as farm wineries by the Department of Alcohol Beverage Control; they can produce 25,000 gallons of wine (10,500 cases) annually. The other 13 are small wineries and can produce 50,000 gallons (21,000 cases).

The state's wineries produced about 4,700 cases of wine in 2001, according to the feasibility study. That figure is expected to increase to 8,000 cases this year and to 34,000 cases by 2007.

New vintners will spur that growth, according to Gerald Dotson, Kentucky Department of Agriculture director of value-added foods. That is why he believes destination wineries are the key.

"Being a tourist destination should be the number one goal because we've got a lot of people just getting started in the wine industry and you're going to have a bunch of inexperienced people growing grapes," Dotson said. "The more wineries you have the better off you'll be, because you'll attract more people. People take vacation and go around to wineries. They're really into that."

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